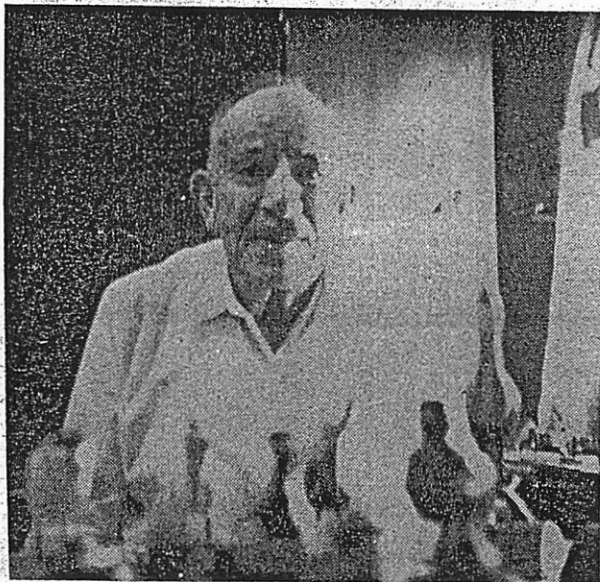


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The Clipper Visits Thornton Burns

BY NANCY McCAFFERTY



Thornton Burns

You walk into their home and are greeted with his booming voice. "Hello, little girl, sit down, sit down! Skipper, get the little girl a cup of coffee, will you? This is going to be awful, isn't it? Well, just cut out 9/10 of the stories I tell you. Sit down, little girl, and make yourself comfortable."

Thornton Burns and his wife, Skipper, (Why Skipper? "Becasue she is!") of Mayflower Ave. live in the house he built in 1924 with the intention of renting it as a summer residence. "When the Depression hit and the bottom fell out, we moved in. We meant to stay just the summer but we never left."

Mr. Burns, born in 1895, learned the carpentry trade at Wentworth Institute in Boston. He built houses in Plymouth, Braintree, and several on Bay Rd. World War I interrupted his practice. He and Skipper were engaged when he got the word he was being shipped to France. They decided to wait until he got back to be married. "That way," he told her, "you won't be out anything."

In January, 1918, Thornton Burns landed at Bordeaux, France and was assigned to a military hospital.

truckload of old doors from MIT and Thornton used them to build lawn furniture, which he sold. The return to woodworking brought him to where he is today. In his basement with a wood-burning stove nearby "to keep my shins warm," he designs and carves figures of birds. The finished pieces fill the shelves in his dining room window. They are true to scale, even the miniatures, and the colors are brilliant and beautifully shaded. Thornton claims he needs no special tools, prefers to use a jackknife, and mixes his own oil-based paints. Native white pine is the preferred wood because of its quality in accepting paint and its adaptability under the knife. He refers to his many pictures and books on birds to insure the correct size, color, and life-like appearance. The end product is a work of art. Delicate shadows and shades of vivid color create figures poised at such angles that if one touched them, the birds would surely take wing.

Although Burns does no advertising and sells only from his home, word of his work has spread. His art has been purchased by people who have carried it to every state and several foreign countries. He lives 2 doors west of the Myles Standish home site and occasionally has tourists who come in and shop. He tells of one lady from New York who asked him to carve a pigeon for her because that was the only bird she could recognize. Once he taught a group of Girl Scouts to sculpt the figures. "I got a big kick out of that," said Burns. "I roughed out wooden pieces for them, then the girls sat around the dining room table and carved. They did a pretty good job too, but were afraid that if they tried to paint they'd spoil the birds so they left them natural. Not one of them cut their fingers. I stab myself all the time!"

Christmas is a busy time for Thornton. He has diversified his carving and makes ornaments which his daughter, Frances, paints. There are 20 different patterns and this year he intends to add a sailor. The samples he showed were absolutely charming and would enhance any Christmas tree. "Aw, anyone can learn to do it, if they've got any brains," claims Thornton, "but no 2 persons' figures will ever end up alike even if they're using the same model. It's just a difference in styles." I don't know. His carvings seem to stem from a highly polished talent and 25 years experience.

Over the years, he and Skipper have experienced national events as they pertained to Duxbury. Thornton recalls the day that Charles Lindbergh flew over the Noök on the first non-stop flight to France. The route and schedule had been published beforehand so he and several neighbors stood in their

was an old monastery with little cubbyhole rooms and the Red Cross visited us and passed out chocolate. My roommate had been giving this nurse a bad time, so she shut the door on us while the Red Cross was there. We wanted the company and the candy, so we looked at each other and instantly decided to do something. I said, 'I know! I'll have a convulsion!' So I went into this act with my roommate trying his best to stop laughing. The nurse rushed in with a thermometer. I knew if she took my temperature, the game was over, so I locked my jaws. Then she tried to take my pulse but I shook and trembled so she couldn't get a good hold. She was about to get a doctor when I conveniently came out of my convulsion and asked feebly if she could open the door. That she did and she brought me some chocolate. I said, as weakly as I could, 'What about him?' -- meaning my roommate. She stared at him a minute, then found some chocolate for him, too. The world was ours from that day on!"

Thornton and Skipper Burns have raised 7 children in their home on Mayflower Ave. Quite a tribute to him and his wife.

His figures reflect the freshness of nature's most exquisite creatures suspended in graceful animation and serve as a reminder that in the face of adversity or disability, a determined somebody can carve a corner of space for himself.

The man with the booming voice has a gentle touch.

station for the naval air force. He was piling lumber for storehouses when the order came down, requesting carpenters. He and 17 other men were sent by train up the Gironde River to La Pallice where they were to construct warehouses designed for naval air storage. Burns eventually had his own 55-man navy working for him. He was also used intermittently by the army for similar construction jobs and dealt in structural iron work at balloon stations set up to spot submarines. Burns said, "By the time I was discharged, I didn't know if I was a sailor or a soldier."

While in La Pallice, drinking water for the troops was transported from the nearby town of La Rochelle. That town was crawling with German agents who, it was later learned, had poisoned the drinking water with a nerve damaging chemical. Burns and several others became ill. They were sent to an Army field hospital which was, in truth, a carriage shed with a dirt floor. For 3 months, Thornton Burns lay in a coma. He said, "3 months of my life were wiped out completely. I didn't even know it when they signed the Armistice."

Since normal movement is non-existent in a comatose state, the hands of this carpenter were idle and his fingers lay curled and still. Two fingernails of his right hand grew into the palm and pushed the fingers themselves into a permanent angle. The nerves in his legs had been severely affected also. He was sent back to his original camp to sick bay but landed in a hospital in Brest for another 3 months. He was then transferred home to Brookline Naval Hospital where the doctors forbade him to even attempt walking. Burns said, "I lay in bed and kept pushing my fingers out away from the palm, trying to make them work again." Skipper traveled to see him but since he was so ill much of the time, she wondered if he would recognize her. He did -- from the first visit onward.

His next stop was Portsmouth Naval Hospital in New Hampshire where he did gain some mobility in his legs and late in 1919 was medically discharged. When asked if he received any kind of disability compensation, he answered emphatically, "damned right I do!"

Thornton married Skipper (real name, Reatha) on January 17, 1920. He was unable to work so she took a job as bookkeeper and private secretary at the Plymouth Foundry.

In time, he went back to carpentry as best he could but the leg disorder interfered with climbing ladders and standing on roofs. He tried his hand at the flower business, using his back yard and a side lot for the garden. One year he had 120,000 gladiolas, plus other varieties which he sold in Duxbury and Marshfield. But the flower business was not his first love and so after a bad year, "I figured it was time to quit."

It happened then that a friend gave him a

American soil. "Boy, was he flying low," said Burns.

During Prohibition, the Nook's coastline was ideal for "rum running." Once Thornton discovered a stash of liquor hidden under fallen tree branches. Being a red-blooded American, Thornton laughed and said, "I was going to go back the next morning and get some but by the time I got there, it was gone." Skipper was stopped one night at the bridge on Marshall St. by a stranger holding a flashlight who searched her car. "At the time I thought it was an Internal Revenue agent on the prowl. Later we learned that the man was a look-out for the rum runners."

Since 1928, when the Burns moved into the house on Mayflower, the shoreline of the Nook has eroded nearly 40 feet. Southeastern storms have swept in, undermining the bank, and the earth has been washed into the sea. Thornton tells an old joke about why Myles Standish settled on the Nook. "Once he got here, he couldn't find his way out again!" If you've ever driven the winding pathways of that area, you tend to agree with Thornton.

World War II was a time of blackouts and blimps patrolling the shoreline on guard for submarines. Black-out shades were fitted to every window or place where a crack of light might shine out in the darkness. Residents of the shore were required to have pictures taken and be fingerprinted so there was some proof of their identity. There was fear at that time that enemy subs might try to land. Night driving was permitted only with parking lights and the white lines, common today, were painted in the middle of the streets to aid visibility. "The parking lights weren't much help," says Thornton. "There were many nights when I thought I might end up in the damn sound!" He and Skipper recall a house built on Crescent St. positioned at an excellent vantage point. Trees and bushes hadn't grown tall enough to restrict the view of the water. They joked then that the house would have been the perfect place for a spy. Which is exactly what it turned out to be. Three people were arrested for relaying signals to foreign submarines hidden in the water.

Burns was recently in the hospital, but the doctors were unable to find the problem. "They said I cured myself," said Thornton. He has an enormous respect for nurses. "They're angels. They give their lives to help people who are up against it. Who sits on the right hand of God? Well, He's going to have to move over for the nurses!" With all the time Burns has spent in hospitals here and in France, he says he has never met a "sour nurse," except the one he and his roommate "converted." He was in the Brest hospital, sharing a room with a man whose ship had been torpedoed. "The man had spent some time soaking in the North Sea before he was fished out, so he was a little troublesome. He had no use for women in the navy, even if they were nurses. The hospital